

## HELPING THE CHILDREN TO HEAL



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One of the newest residents at Interval House was 5 years old. A staff counsellor rounded a corner in the hall to find him lashing out at his mother. When she stepped in to intervene, he said, "Well, my Daddy did it, why can't I?"

Helping children learn about appropriate behaviour is one of the most important challenges faced by counsellors at Interval House when dealing with families traumatized by violence.

Children who have witnessed their mother's abuse, or endured it themselves, need a special kind of care. First of all, they need reassurance that they're now in a safe space. A place where their feelings can be expressed. That they're not alone, and what happened to them and their mothers should never happen to anybody.

The kids who end up being bullied in the schoolyard need to learn how to be assertive. The ones who mimic the bullying behaviour they saw at home, need to learn it's not acceptable. And all kids benefit from learning how to resolve conflicts in a peaceful way.

Interval House has a host of children's

activities designed to give these children the opportunities they need to heal and learn.

On Wednesdays, there's Art Group, where kids come down to the play area in small groups to use art materials to express themselves. Counsellors talk to the children about the work they've created as a way to open up a dialogue about what they're feeling.

On Thursdays, the Kids Group brings boys and girls together to discuss the issues topmost in their minds. Such as why they're living in this place, how they feel about their parents, what to do about that kid at school who's picking on them, and how to respond when someone hurts you. Sometimes they see movies on relevant topics, other times they head out to the park to burn off a little steam.

The Kids Group has two adult facilitators, one male and one female, to give the children positive role models in both genders.

There's also structured family time at Interval House, where moms and kids can interact, while watchful counsellors can also model good parenting skills for the moms and good behaviour for the kids.

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## STYLISH NEW LOOKS REFLECT INTERNAL TRANSFORMATIONS

“I didn't recognize myself!” Sophia, age 78, says of the transformation she received as part of the Interval House “Makeover” program. Brian Vivian, a senior hair stylist and Kate Kennedy, a make up artist from one of Toronto’s most chic salons have begun a series of free makeovers for women at Interval House. They can both be seen on CityLine with Marilyn Denis at 10:00 on Citytv.



**A staff counsellor told Sophia that her new look (right) made her look like a movie star. At left, Sophia before the makeover.**

“Not only did I feel good physically, but emotionally it was quite a lift, because I felt so much younger,” says Sophia, a former shelter resident. “I didn’t realize I could look that beautiful when I was made up, and it stayed with me for quite some time.”

Sophia, who speaks six languages, hopes her new style will help her find the job that she so urgently needs.

“Everyone said I looked so great, like a fashion consultant or a woman executive, but I have to be realistic,” she says. “I know not many people want to hire someone of my age. I’ll have to take whatever I can get.”

But Sophia says her experience at Interval House has helped to change her outlook. She’s fought back from a place of low self-esteem created by a lifetime of being “isolated, dominated, abused and manipulated,” first by her parents and then by two husbands.

“At Interval House, I found myself communicating with people of varied nationalities and ages, and everyone, from counsellors to residents, made me feel welcome, liked and even loved,” she says. “As a result, I left the shelter as a person with more positive feelings about myself and the future.”

Jannine, 26, a participant in the Building Economic Self-Sufficiency (B.E.S.S.) employment skills program at Interval House, says she was nervous before her makeover.

“I didn’t know what to expect,” she says. “The result was something very different, not something I’d ever thought of doing. But everybody noticed the change and really liked the new me. I felt a lot more confident.”

Jannine is also hoping her new-found confidence in her appearance will help her land a full-time job. Currently working part-time as a housekeeper, Jannine has a 21-month-old son to support.

She left the baby’s father last spring, after enduring five years of emotional and sexual abuse. “Sometimes I think emotional abuse is worse, because physical hurts heal, but the emotional stuff stays with you for a long time and the anger builds up,” she says. “But through B.E.S.S. I learned a lot about myself, about being more assertive, and I feel even stronger now.”



**Jannine says she was the centre of attention after her makeover (“before” and “after” photos at left and right respectively).**

## A GENEROUS NEIGHBOUR SHARES HER HARVEST

If you build it, they will come.

The new, expanded Interval House is not just attracting more women to its safe haven. Ever since the new shelter opened, community members have been arriving on our doorstep with offers of help.

One such generous neighbour is Kyla Dixon-Muir, the coordinator of a local community garden, who appeared one day last August with the offer of fresh organic produce.

“Our garden is part of the Toronto Community Gardening Network, which subscribes to the national ‘Plant a row, Grow a row’ program. Gardeners are asked to grow an extra row of produce to help feed those in need in their communities,” explains Kyla.

“My personal preference is to take my produce directly to a kitchen, rather than having it sit wilting in a food bank, so that’s why I approached Interval House,” she says. “We grow a lot of heritage and heirloom varieties here, odd stuff that people don’t recognize, to discourage vandalism. But that kind of produce needs some explaining to the cook.”

Once every week or so, Kyla meets Rose Nelson, the new cook at Interval House, to harvest the latest bounty from her own plot, as well as surplus from the communal areas of the garden. Squash, zucchini, lettuce, tomatoes, beets, beans, spinach, eggplants, sweet potatoes, herbs and many other garden delights have been supplied to the shelter’s kitchen.

In the process, Kyla passes along hints about



**Rose Nelson, Interval House’s first-ever cook, picks some beets with Kyla Dixon-Muir, the coordinator of a local community garden.**

different ways the produce can be used, and introduces Rose to varieties she’s not encountered before. For her part, Rose bubbles over with news of all the successful dishes she’s prepared with the community garden donations.

“It’s been amazing to have such beautiful, organic produce donated,” says Rose. “Not only has it been helpful in creating nutritious meals for the residents, but it’s also led to significant savings on our fresh produce bill!”

It was providential that about the same time that Kyla appeared with her offer of produce, Rose joined Interval House as its first-ever cook. Hired to cook

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On Tuesday nights, activities like crafts, movies and baking give mothers and their children quality time together.

On Saturdays, staff members take the families on group outings. It's not just about having time together. It's also about learning how to get around the city on transit, and how to have fun without spending a lot of money. This past summer, the Interval House families attended a lot of free street festivals, and for a special outing, went to the zoo.

"The main idea behind all of our activities is to

help the children understand that they're safe now and making a new beginning," says Rubina Khan, Children's Advocate. "We help them realize that they're strong people who will be able to heal."

Of course, there are always the quiet, informal moments for counselling one-on-one to help children get over their trauma. Sometimes kids need extra help from outside agencies to cope with the horrors they've witnessed.

"No child should ever have to go through what these children have faced," says Rubina. "Although the process doesn't happen overnight, our job is to make sure the cycle of violence gets broken here, and that children are able to move toward happy, healthy lives."

## MAMA ROSE ...continued from page 3

dinner four nights a week (Monday to Thursday) at the shelter, Rose has been able to make the most efficient use of everything donated by the community garden.

"I grew up in the (Caribbean) Islands, where you learned to cook with whatever grows around you," says Rose. "And I love to cook!"

Rose is an intern from Interval House's Building Economic Self-Sufficiency (B.E.S.S.) employment program. Before joining B.E.S.S., Rose was a volunteer cook at her church, at an agency that fed the homeless, and at another abused

women's shelter, where she had also been a resident. Rose plans to attend resident meetings, where she can learn about specific dishes dear to the hearts of women from other cultures.

"I'll buy the ingredients and then we'll make their special dishes together," Rose enthuses. "That way, we'll make Interval House feel a bit more like home."

Rose also puts on workshops about kitchen hygiene for the residents. The residents feel very cared for by Rose and have started affectionately calling her Mama Rose.



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